

Improving Education in America

Most everyone in America agrees on the importance of our public education system. However, there is widespread disagreement about whether our nation's public schools are providing quality education for the diverse populations they are asked to serve. Studies show that America spends \$810 billion annually on our school systems (there are a multitude of ways to measure educational spending—per student we spend a lot, more than all but a few countries, but as a % of GDP we are somewhere in the middle). As a nation we rank globally in 17th place in reading and 32nd place in math. According to the most recent (2012) results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) — a test of critical thinking administered every three years to about half a million 15-year-olds around the globe — U.S. students are lagging behind those in many other countries, including China, Finland and Korea, in math, reading and science. Compared with other developed nations, the U.S. performs average or below.

Graduation rates and test scores indicate that minority and low-income children do not attain the same achievement levels as their non-minority, higher income peers. Business and industry leaders remark that non-college bound high school graduates are often inadequately prepared to enter the work force. State and local school districts across the country have attempted to address these perceived academic and vocational achievement gaps through a host of strategies: more rigorous curriculum, high stakes testing, increased emphasis on early childhood education, individualized student resourcing, work-study programs, etc. Meanwhile, school districts often complain that there is inadequate funding to address the issues of teacher pay and retention. In most industrialized countries relative teacher pay is higher than in the U.S. While U.S. salaries aren't the lowest, many other countries not only pay better, but the gap is really, really big. Other issues include increasing educational expectations and the tailoring of instruction or offering of programs to meet the complexity of the needs students are facing today.

Over the past 50 years a growing number of parents have opted, when resources are available to them, to send their children to private schools or to charter schools that have been developed as alternatives to troubled or low-performing local public schools. This demand for improved schools has led to the development of charter schools that accept students with a specified amount of public school tuition allocated for their education. These schools are in fact “public” schools, although in many states they are subject to fewer requirements, especially teacher certification. Meanwhile, people committed to public school education complain that charter schools actually represent the abandonment of traditional public education.

At present, the data on educational success of students attending charter schools is mixed. A 2015 study by the Stanford University Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) found that across the charter schools in the 26 states studied, 25 percent have significantly stronger learning gains in reading than their traditional school counterparts, while 56 percent showed no significant difference and 19 percent of charter schools have significantly weaker learning gains. In mathematics, 29 percent of charter schools showed student learning gains that were significantly stronger than their traditional public school peers', while 40 percent were not significantly different and 31 percent were significantly weaker. Educational gains were greatest in urban areas where public education has historically been the worst.

CREDO also provided data on individual states. Here's what they had to say about Texas: on average, charter schools in Texas show less progress in both reading and mathematics compared to their district school peers. This shortfall in learning can be equated to a student losing about 14 days of learning in reading and 29 days of learning in math based on an 180-day school year.

Both professional educators and business leaders have proposed a menagerie of solutions aimed at fixing the American education system.

- Educators often argue that the quality of a child’s teacher is the single most-important school-related factor for his or her success. Consequently, schools of education and school districts are responsible for doing a better job of producing and supporting properly trained teachers. They suggest that the specific changes needed to produce and resource better teachers require a larger investment of time, money, and training. Instructional improvements also depend on capable school district leaders and school principals who know how to enhance their teachers and resource them.
- Business leaders ask schools to do a better job preparing their students to meet the challenges of a technologically driven workplace that utilizes specialized skills and prizes ingenuity and innovation. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, for instance, advocates for more teacher and school accountability, school choices for parents who want a better education for their children, higher standards—like the Common Core curriculum—and schools that stress innovation and educate their students to be competitive—and employable. Meanwhile, universities and colleges often require competitive test scores and academic achievements for admission and often push for better math and science preparation at the high school level. The increasing educational demands for professional competencies and specialized training has pushed colleges and universities to seek more funding and contributed to increases in tuition.
- Some researchers and educational think tanks argue for structural changes in school systems that emphasize more teacher accountability, more flexibility in teaching methods, and more instructional time in the classroom instead of maintaining strict pupil-teacher classroom ratios. Local schools are now being challenged to explore technology-based curricula that allows kids to work at their own pace and set their own goals. This approach also lets teachers give more focused attention to smaller groups—while other groups work independently—instead of always teaching the whole class at once.
- Some educational theorists argue that the curriculum—the way we teach—is at the heart of the problem. Today schools teach individual subjects—history, math, science, literature—by rote, breaking them into individual pieces. Instead, we should be taking an integrated approach that would allow students to assimilate what they are learning into their life experiences. The curriculum should model that whole and should help learners discover or create a corresponding conceptual framework or structure of knowledge. This approach argues that the modern curriculum breaks reality into myriad small pieces and addresses each piece in isolation, with little attempt to show how the individual pieces relate to each other or how they fit together to form the whole.
- Politics has also affected the discussion about improving public education. Federal law has boosted funding for schools in low-income neighborhoods, put books in libraries and helped ensure that minorities, students with disabilities, those learning English, those living in poverty and others who have struggled would not slip through the cracks. Since 2000, high school graduation rates, once stagnant, rose almost 10 percentage points, to an all-time high. A young Hispanic person is now half as likely to drop out of high school compared with 15 years ago and twice as likely to be in college. A million more black and Hispanic students are in college than were in 2008.
- However, many issues remain. Federal and state budget considerations for education, high stakes testing, school choice, Federal/state/local control of the curriculum, the impact of teachers unions and many other facets of the educational process are flashpoints with respect to how best improve public education in America.

References

American Schools vs. the World: Expensive, Unequal, Bad at Math, *The Atlantic*, December 3, 2013.
Stanford University Center for Research in Educational Outcomes